

Chapter 5. Community Character and Design

The City of Colonial Heights prides itself on its small-town character, although the physical appearance of the City is not what you would think of as a typical small-town. It is the sense of community that makes Colonial Heights feel like a traditional small-town.

A recurring theme that came out of the citizen survey and visioning session is the desire to preserve the small-town character of Colonial Heights. The small-town feel comes from having numerous tight-knit neighborhoods where people share common beliefs and experiences in addition to having all the necessary services located close to home.

A community's character can be a strong incentive to retain existing residents, attract new residents and businesses and substantially improve the quality of life. The policies in this chapter seek to preserve Colonial Heights' small-town character while making the most of its location off the interstate and prominence in the Tri-Cities area for providing goods and services.

Urban Design

Urban design can play an important role in making a community viable and the conditions for economic health and a good quality of life. Urban design can create living spaces with distinctive character, safe, walkable neighborhoods and public spaces.

It is important to consider the following urban design elements as the City changes over the next 30 years. This can be done in conjunction with new development or redevelopment, but it can also be implemented in existing areas in the City.

Street Design

Whether the neighborhood is historic, with homes closely situated to the street, the narrow travel lanes, and the sense of enclosure created by hundred year old trees, or a more spread out, suburban style neighborhood, street design features are an important element to create a residential street that is safe and welcoming. This design can force traffic to move slowly, allowing people to walk and bicycle through the neighborhoods and for children to play safely. Being walkable and safe helps give our neighborhoods a small-town feel by encouraging interaction among residents.

Sidewalks

According to community input, walkability is a priority for the City. Providing pedestrian connections can be achieved by sidewalk construction or via a trail system. Within a built environment like Colonial Heights, it is expected that a combination of both would be necessary to make the most use of the existing infrastructure.

Sidewalks assist people to get around by providing an alternative to walking in the street or driving in a car. Ideally, they link people to work, parks, schools, shopping areas, and home. Sidewalks can provide a safe place for exercise and for children to play, which subsequently encourages interaction between community members.

In order to have a walkable community, safe pedestrian crossings at major roadways should be constructed. Crosswalks should be constructed that are visible to both the pedestrian and the driver. This can be achieved by installing pavers to distinguish the crosswalk from the road.

Street Lighting

Proper street lighting is essential for creating a safe environment for both pedestrians and vehicles. Street level lighting, or light with fixtures that are closer to pedestrian height, can play the role of safety and help create an environment that is more welcoming to the pedestrian and can add ornamental design to an area.

Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED)

Urban design also plays an important role in public safety. Crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) is a multi-disciplinary approach to deterring crime through environmental design. CPTED strategies are based on preventing crime by creating a built environment that is not conducive for criminal behavior. Making sure landscaping does not provide screening for criminal activity is an example of CPTED strategies. Lighting is important in prevention because a person is less likely to commit a crime if they can be seen.

Signage

Signage, although important for promoting businesses and events, should not overshadow the landscape. Thought must be given to sign placement and size and design of the sign. A sign must be compatible with its surrounding, both the built and natural environment.

Citywide Sign Ordinance

In 2007, the City created a sign ordinance to address the concern of sign clutter, both with freestanding signs and signage on buildings. In addition, the ordinance began to regulate temporary signs that were increasing around the City.

A task force of local business leaders, government officials and other interested citizens working with the City's Planning Department developed the new proposed regulations. The task force met monthly for 16 months to develop the new proposal and ensure the new regulations would balance the needs of businesses addressing the sign clutter issue.

Wayfinding Sign Plan

In 2011, the City developed a Community Wayfinding Sign Plan to increase City revenue and to enhance the community image. Wayfinding signs are used to direct visitors to local sites of interest including city hall, the library, parks and public attractions in a unified manner.

The idea was to create revenue by promoting the Boulevard business corridor and to guide visitors to various economic activities within the City. In addition, the Wayfinding

signs remove the visual clutter by replacing the existing random placement of various signs with one sign.

The program helps beautify the City by organizing information using a consistent sign design. Additionally, these signs show route numbers, destinations, directions, distances, services, points of interest, or other geographical, recreational, or cultural information.

Trees

Most of the City's neighborhoods are lacking formal street trees, meaning there were no trees planted by the City or developer along the street or sidewalk when the neighborhood was established. However, as the City ages, many of the existing neighborhoods have developed tree canopies. Tree canopies are created when trees mature and their branches spread from house to house or across the street providing a shaded, enclosed environment. Unfortunately, as the neighborhoods age, trees are dying off and private owners are responsible for these trees; therefore, they are often not replaced.

Public Parks and Open Spaces

The City contains a number of parks, as well as a lot of undevelopable open space in the form of wetlands. Fort Clifton, Lakeview, Roslyn Landing and White Bank Landing parks serve all City residents and often regional visitors. White Bank Landing, Lakeview and Roslyn Landing offer boat access as well as green space that can be used for walking, jogging or passive sports. The City's neighborhood parks serve the residents who live within walking distance.

Publicly Owned Land

The City is responsible for maintaining many different forms of public land. In addition to maintaining all the landscaping at the City's public buildings and parks, the City maintains numerous pieces of right-of-way that exist throughout the City. Limited public funding often makes maintenance and new investments a challenge.

Neighborhoods

Neighborhood conditions and strategies for improvement are discussed in context to revitalization in the Neighborhood and Housing chapter of this plan. However, it should be noted that they play a major role in defining the character of this community. Neighborhood development in the City spans well over 100 years. The earliest neighborhoods were established in the early 1900s in the southern portion of the city and, more recently, neighborhoods have been established in the Conjurers Neck area. This development over a long period of time results in a variety of housing types and street design throughout the city and contributes to the character of each neighborhood and to the overall City.

Historic Districts

The City has one recognized State and National Historic District; and at the time of the writing of this document, was pursuing another. In order to be eligible for listing, a house or district must be at least 50 years old. There are a number of other

neighborhoods within the City that may be eligible for historic designation. Although it has been established that historic designation encourages revitalization and economic growth through the use of tax credits, it should be noted that listing on the State and National Registries is honorary; and the designation alone provides little to no architectural preservation protections.

Gateways and Image Corridors

Gateways and image corridors are areas that serve as entrances to or passageways through the City. Gateways and image corridors provide a snapshot of the City that potentially leaves a lasting impression on visitors and a passer-through. Potentially, Gateways should establish a "sense of place" when entering the City and provide a welcoming introduction to the City. Gateways provide an opportunity for well-designed signage to direct visitors around the City and promote local destinations. Gateways can be defined through signage, landscaping, and special design features.

Gateways

Gateways are located at intersections that enter the City. This plan identifies two types of gateways: Primary gateways, which are well traveled and often greet visitors from farther away than our adjacent communities. Secondary gateways more often serve as an entrance to the City from nearby communities.

For both types of gateways, visitors should immediately be greeted with a welcoming sense of entry to the City; because gateways provide the first and often only impressions of the community.

Careful planning for the boundaries between the City and our adjacent neighboring localities is needed. It is important to create an entrance to the city; however, there should be design coordination in street design and streetscape improvement whenever possible. The small-town feel of our community is affected by the design and uses on our boundaries and edges.

In 2011, the City developed a Way Finding Signage Plan. The plan proposed to have way finding signs installed at key entrances into the City where there were currently no welcome signs. The intent was to increase revenue, promoting both the Boulevard Business Corridor and to guide visitors to the City to various economic activities. These consistently designed signs aimed to enhance the community image by removing the visual sign clutter at these intersections.

Primary Gateways

Primary Gateways, in addition to being clean, welcoming and well landscaped, should provide visitors with way finding signs to help guide them easily to their destinations whether it be shopping or attending one of the many City parks or cultural events.

Secondary Gateways

Secondary gateways should provide a more cozy entrance with more subtle signage. Landscaping and streetscape design should promote the small-town feel that is so important to the citizens of this community.

Image Corridor

Our image corridors often provide an impression of Colonial Heights on travelers who may be just passing through the City. It may be the only opportunity to entice visitors to stop and invest in the City's businesses and attractions. Enhancement of gateways and image corridors can be done with landscaping, careful control over land use and design, and maintenance of public spaces.

Interstate Image Corridor

For many visitors, Interstate 95 provides the first and often only view of our City. This view includes many signs inviting people to stop and shop at our retail businesses, service stations and restaurants. Coordinated, attractive signage is important because it is often the only opportunity to grab the attention of the passersby and encourage them to visit the highway oriented businesses and Southpark Mall.

The interstate image corridor needs to be visually appealing to maintain its attraction to shoppers who have many regional malls and shopping areas to choose from in the Richmond market.

A City partnership with the business community to provide the landscaping along this corridor and signage directing visitors to shopping destinations should be considered as part of a long-term economic development strategy for the City.



Map 4

-  Primary Gateway
 Interstate Image Corridor
-  Secondary Gateway
 Image Corridor

Boulevard Image Area

The Boulevard (Route 1/301) runs north and south through the City. Prior to the construction of Interstate 95, it was the primary north/south road for the entire east coast.

The Boulevard serves many commercial and service functions. Both public and semi-public buildings are located here, including the public safety building and the post office. The Boulevard is home to many locally owned restaurants and businesses, with some national fast-food chains and numerous professional offices. The Boulevard plays an important role in the community. One of the reasons the City feels like a small-town is because of the many local services provided on the Boulevard. Residents often know the merchants personally, which promotes loyalty from customers and vice versa.

Development of the Boulevard occurred prior to planning and design standards being put in place, resulting in a disorderly appearance. The development along the Boulevard is characterized by an array of building types and setbacks, access and parking issues, and limited landscaping. There is only intermittent pedestrian access, as much of the development in its early years was car oriented, serving the north/south traveler.

Boulevard Overlay District

In 2003 the City's zoning ordinance was amended to include the Boulevard Overlay District to encourage quality, compatible development along the Boulevard. The intent is to achieve a sense of order and unity along the corridor by regulating signage and requiring new businesses to provide streetscape improvements including landscaping, sidewalks and uniform lighting. The overlay district establishes six sub areas of the Boulevard: Chesterfield Approach, Commercial Center, The Valley, Main Street, Government Center, and Petersburg Approach. Each sub area is intended to match the design improvements to the type of services provided in that area.

Boulevard Modernization

The Boulevard Modernization Project is intended to provide improved traffic operations on the Boulevard from Lafayette Avenue to Westover Avenue. Benefits of the project include enhanced pedestrian movements, increased safety, and aesthetic appearance of the corridor. Reconstruction will also provide new auxiliary lanes and a better storm drain system among other improvements. The goal of this project is to improve this section of the Boulevard not only for driving, but also for shopping and walking. The project includes landscaping and ornamental lighting in the improved areas.

Boulevard Matching Grant Program

The Boulevard Revitalization Committee, made up of Boulevard business owners/managers, was formed in 2003 to help guide the implementation of the newly adopted Boulevard Design Guidelines. A matching grant program was developed to encourage Boulevard Business owners to reinvest in their business by undertaking improvements that would make the business more functional and/or attractive and lead to a stronger business climate.

The program had a return on investment of 4:1. Over a 5 year period, 71 grant funded projects were completed with a total investment of \$1,519,264. The City portion of this investment was \$326,974. There was a wide variety of improvement made as a result of this program. Funds were spent on landscaping, parking, roofing, painting, signage, windows, lighting, demolition, sidewalks and fencing.

Since the development of the Overlay District, the new sign regulation, the Boulevard Modernization and the Boulevard Grant Program, the overall appearance of the Boulevard has begun to transform for the better. There is less sign clutter, more landscaping, and façade improvements. Additionally, the installation of sidewalks as part of the Boulevard Modernization Program enhances the pedestrian experience.

The following Community Character and Design Policies correspond to a specific goal and objective found in Chapter 2. The goal and policy number are abbreviated within the parenthesis.

- Create guidelines for the eight (8) gateway entrances to the City identified on the Gateway and Image Corridor Map (Map 4) that emphasize code enforcement, limit commercial sign clutter, add landscaping and add signage welcoming people to the City. (CC-1)
- Where possible, require a connection between adjacent developments, both residential and commercial, to avoid having to get into a car. (SD-2, QL-1)
- Create an overlay district to improve the visual image of the City south of Temple Avenue on Interstate 95 by minimizing sign clutter, adding landscaping and improving the appearance of backdoors of business facing the interstate. (SD-2)
- Support the efforts of the Boulevard Revitalization Steering Committee by reinstating the Boulevard Revitalization Program. (EP-3)
- Work with mall management and mall area businesses to promote safety by design, to include adequate lighting and sidewalks in all new development, and through education, encourage it in existing development. (EP-5)
- Public spaces should be created within neighborhoods and in commercial areas to encourage people to come together. Incorporate complete street concepts to include street trees, sidewalks, bikeways, landscaping, and lighting with all new development, redevelopment projects and transportation in the City when possible. (QL-2, EP-3, CC-1, SD-3, SD-2, CC-3)
- In parks and in those instances where there are street trees in the public right-of-way, a program should be developed for trees to be replaced when they are removed. (CC-5)

- In environmentally sensitive areas of the City, every effort should be made to ensure that a minimum number of trees be removed when new development takes place. Trees and other natural materials should be encouraged for stormwater management practices.(CC-5, SD-5)
- Create a City landscaping plan to identify priority planting locations and an implementation schedule. This should apply to gateways, medians, and public rights-of-way throughout the City. (CC-5)
- The City should increase the number of trees and plantings in public parks and in public areas throughout the City. (CC-5, SD-5)